

It has been my experience that everybody gets into Christmas; the spirit of Christmas, the idea of Christmas is easy for people to identify with. Most people get into Lent because Lent is really about suffering; everybody suffers. Then we get into Easter and, well, it might be a nice celebration, but then what do you do with Easter? Pentecost—I see most people simply dismayed at the very idea of Pentecost. They don't know what it means or what it has to do with them.

In a similar way, when I have quizzed families at Baptism: “Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?” “Yes,” comes out! “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried?” “Yes!” “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?” “Yessss”—there is just a falling away of understanding when we get into the more, if I dare say, spiritual, mystical dimensions of our faith. The Holy Spirit is at the very center of the Church as the soul of the Church, and yet we know so little about the Spirit and how the Spirit works and operates. **The Life in the Spirit Seminar is to help us to move more easily into the work of the Spirit, to become more aware of the work of the Spirit in our own lives.**

For this reason we start with some basics. Now these are really basics, but they are the part of our faith that we cannot ever forget about. First of all, that God is love. Now people like to say that. They like to sing about it. But now we have to think about it. What does it mean when we say, “God is love”? It means that **the very nature of God is love**. Well, what is love? Actually, we don't help ourselves by saying things—“God is love”—when we don't really know what love is. We cannot explain it in words. That's why God decided that **Jesus, the Word of God**, would become flesh in Jesus, so that his life would describe to us what love is. **His life is a description beyond words of what love means.**

What he showed us is that God's interests are unlimited and unbounded and incorporates all of our welfare into his. This is something Jesus teaches at many different times and places. So **God's love is for all that he has created, which includes us**. It is not only for those who believe in him. It is not only for those who are obedient to him. It is not only for those who are faithful. It is not only for those who are good. That would be conditioned love, but **God's love is not conditioned because God is love, and therefore God loves from his own nature.**

And, by the way, I always say “his,” and we do use the word “his” or “him” referring to God, because **God is conscious**, so we can't say “it.” **We have to use a personal pronoun**, otherwise we would say “God” all the time, and that's a little bit clumsy. And it is our tradition to say God as “he” because in the ancient world there were two aspects of God: God in the earth, and that was “her”; and God in the heavens, and that was

“him.” Well, we don’t believe that God is the earth. The earth is the creation; we do believe God is transcendent—also immanent, but not identified with the earth. In fact, in the biblical view it’s *Adam* and *Adamma*, humanity and the earth, that have that relationship, not God and the earth. So in many ways we have taken the role of God in the ancient myths; that’s what the Bible has done for us. It has put us in the role that the ancient myths had for the gods. We are the gods now. And that means that our will is very important because we are all endowed with free will. **In our free will we can respond to God or we can reject God.**

It is very important that we keep that in mind, that we have free will because the creative work of God includes and sustains absolutely everything. It says in the prologue of John’s Gospel: “Nothing came to be apart from the Word”—“Nothing came to be apart from the Word.” **It’s impossible for anything to exist that is not brought into existence and kept in existence by the Word of God.** So St. Paul says, “We live and move and have our being in God.” He isn’t just talking about believers. He is not just talking about good people. He is not talking about people who believe the way he believes. He is talking about everything; **everything lives and moves and has its being in God.** There is no other possible mode of existence. Even the devil has this existence in God. And even sin—St. Thomas talks about this—even sin exists in God, in this sense: that God has to actually participate in our sin because **there is nothing we can do without God.** Now Thomas is appalled by this in one way. But he says it’s a sign of how much **God loves us and wants us to be free, and would rather cooperate in our willful rejection of him than to have us not free to reject him. So I want you to think about that, how God is love and we are free; we are free to take God or not; we are free to reject God.**

Yesterday we celebrated **Divine Mercy Sunday.** Divine Mercy Sunday is a recent feast, a recent memorial, you might say, that is based on the teachings of a particular sister, a particular nun, who received, you might say, private revelations, which the Church does not necessarily approve of, but which fit so well with the gospel. And these have to do with the fact that **God’s love never stops, and that we need to keep praying for every person because theoretically,** and Pope John Paul put it this way, theoretically **every single person can be saved.** And Pope John Paul said we need to hope for that and pray for that, the salvation of every single person. Whether that is likely or probable, is another matter, but **we need to recognize its possibility and want its possibility.** That’s good for us to want that possibility and to pray for that possibility and to recognize that God has never pushed anyone away. Any pushing is on our side.

Now when God revealed himself to Moses, if you remember the story in Exodus and the burning bush, and Moses said after he was commissioned to go to pharaoh, he said, “Oh, by the way, whom should I say has sent me?” And God said to him, “I AM WHO AM.” So not only is God love, but God is the ground of awareness. **Human awareness itself is a reflection of God and the divine nature.** So when we read in the Book of Genesis that God created human beings in his image and likeness, it means with this **ability to be conscious of self,** which if you think about it, is actually a prerequisite to freedom. **Without being aware of ourselves, we really wouldn’t be free.**

Now the problem is we are living in a world in which many people have made very little effort and our society makes no effort, our culture makes no effort, to reflect these possibilities, these realities: the divine being of love; the inclusion of all things in that, in God's love; the groundedness of consciousness in God, which is reflected in ourselves and therefore our likeness unto God—that is not something our culture acknowledges, talks about, reflects upon. It did at some point in the history of Europe. The great cultural developments in Europe during the Middle Ages were the cathedrals, but we don't have those kinds of cathedrals. **We don't have cultural icons reflecting the truths of the gospel.** So we are in a special situation; we have to acknowledge it.

So therefore **we grew up in a society very often not even stimulated with any kind of dreaming about the big picture, about the purpose of life.** We search for security, yes; everyone wants to be secure. Everyone experiences fear and anxiety. But we often don't search for more than security. And security we often interpret in a materialistic way because we live in a society that interprets everything materialistically. And human beings are created to adapt, so we adapt, unfortunately in this case, to a very materialistic status quo in which the real questions are never raised. **Why are we here? What is the reason for our existence?**

Now our Scriptures give us a story, a story of God's inviting, God's inviting us to a relationship and, by the way, reveals the fact that God is himself relational. And we call these relations "Father," "Son," "Spirit." Father, Son, and Spirit are three relations. And God invites us into this life of, we call it, the "Trinity." In the Trinity there is a communion of love and sharing of all being, and it is this that God is inviting us to share in.

Now on the one hand, as I mentioned before, everything is in God and cannot not be in God; but on the other hand, we are free to separate ourselves in terms of our will, in terms of our choices, in terms of our decisions. We are free to take our own journey, but God really wants us with him, and **God really wants us in an intimate relationship.** Formal religion has not always brought about this because as children are brought into religion and as people grow up, life takes a certain sort of autonomy; it has a life of its own. Because of this we often don't actually develop the sort of intimacy that God is offering us. In fact, many people don't even know about it, and follow, what you might call, a mechanical way of life; that is, they go through certain motions: they do certain things, they may be good things, they may go to Mass, they may pray the rosary, they may do all kinds of wonderful things, but **they don't open their hearts to the presence of God. Therefore they really cheat themselves from something that is very rich.**

Now we have all been introduced into these invitations through the sacraments. The sacramental life of the Church is the positing, the giving, of these gifts, these relational gifts, **these gifts of invitation of intimacy. They are given to us in Baptism, in Confirmation, in Eucharist.** We were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **The Father is the source of everything. The Son is the one who became human and has shared life with us and wants to be our teacher, our guide, and our Lord, and that means our master.** This is somewhat ironic or paradoxical that by accepting Jesus as Lord we actually become free, but this is true. This is one of the

things that, well, you can test for yourself. When you want to do your own thing, then ask yourself, well, what is it that determines what I want? And it's not you; something else has determined what you want. Either it is something internal like something instinctive or something external that you have adapted to because everyone else says it's good. But **you are really free when you accept God and what God wants.**

So the purpose of our seminar, then, is to help us to develop this personal relationship with God. Some people, although sincere, struggle with serious weaknesses. For example, they might have certain failures in their lives and they really don't love themselves or they have lost respect for themselves. Some people maybe have certain addictions, and these addictions are more or less what masters their life. **This seminar will help, at least it proposes to help, people with weaknesses to find strength, people with addictions to find freedom, and people who have lost a love of themselves and respect for themselves to rediscover the goodness that God sees in them,** even if they do not. Now some people do have a good prayerful life, a holy life, a spiritual life. **This seminar will help those people to sink their roots more deeply into the vastness of God's riches.**

Now we begin the story of Advent, of **the Incarnation**, with this teaching, this truth, that God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—desired the Son and only the Son to become human, to share our human lives. And he did this without losing his divinity. Now it's important that we don't try to figure out how God did this, or how Jesus did this, or what it was like. That's not the point. The point the gospels present is this wonderful truth that **humanity and divinity have come together, and that purpose of coming together is for our sake.** In fact, what the Scriptures hint at is that human nature and even earthly life without this Incarnation doesn't have any real goal or purpose, that hidden in God's mind from the very beginning was this joining together of heaven and earth. **That is why human beings are capable of insight and reflection and freedom, because God wants to join together his divine nature with their created nature.**

Now everything Jesus did was saving. His birth was a saving act. His childhood was a saving process, a saving action. Everything he did was part of a salvific process. His whole life and his whole teachings were an offer to us of eternity, which is another way of saying the divine nature. The divine nature is eternal; only God is eternal, so when **Jesus says he offers eternal life,** he means God. He is offering us **to become God, and that's exactly how the Fathers of the Church talked.** They talked about becoming God. Now people think that sounds maybe even impious or perhaps over the top or something, but that's exactly how the Fathers of the Church talked.

Now we call Jesus "Christ" or "Messiah," meaning "the anointed one." In Colossians we read: **"He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sin."** Now this is referring to God. **God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—has rescued us from the power of darkness.** Now I don't think I need to convince you of the power of darkness, that our world is gripped by some really great evil, and this evil is personal; it affects people, individuals; it affects societies; it affects vast areas. But the point that the Scripture makes and the point St. Paul is making in this letter is that God has rescued us

from this, and **we are now to live in the kingdom of the beloved Son as coheirs, as sisters and brothers, of this beloved Son.** He has transferred us, as this particular translation says, into this kingdom. And in this kingdom we have redemption and forgiveness of sins.

Now it's important that we realize that we have forgiveness of sins because sometimes we are the cause of some of the evil in the world or in our own personal lives. We have to realize that that is not some sort of irremedial fact. We can remedy that fact with the fact of our forgiveness. The word that we use in the sacrament of Penance is "absolution." *Absolvo* really means "I separate from." What the priest is saying is: **"I separate you from your sins."** They do not have to remain with us. In fact, part of the whole process of sanctification involves **finding a new memory.** St. Teresa of Avila talked about this. She said **too much of our lives were spent not aware of the presence of God** and so our memories are unreliable, because we are thinking about, oh, back then when I was so abandoned or back then when I was this or that. But you didn't know about God being there. So your memory is no good; you need a renewed memory; **you need a healed memory. That is also one of the, you might say, facets of spiritual growth.**

Now when Jesus was in Caesarea Philippi, he brought up a question to his disciples: "Who do people say that I am?" And they came up with several different answers. Then he says, "Who do you say that I am?" Now it's very important to know that saying "Christ" is not the right answer. That's just a word. I mean, it's a good answer; we use it, but what he really means is, **"Who do YOU say that I am?" Now that's a question that you need to be with tonight and throughout this coming week.** Who do you say that Jesus is? And don't try to find a right answer. **Try to find a true answer, an answer that reflects your actual faith.** And if you find that when you say, well, Jesus isn't really too much for me, well, then you need to find out who Jesus really is. You should not worry about feeling foolish or, well gee, how come I have wasted so much of my time? How come I don't know this? **Wherever you are in your walk, wherever you are in your journey, that's just where you are. You have to accept that and move on from there and not allow anything to hold you back.**

So we believe, then, that Jesus lived, died, and rose again for us, to give us new life. So we read in the Gospel of John, **"I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."** One of the things that we do not really understand, and I include myself—I have really never grasped the abundance of God's love, the abundance of blessings that God wants to shower upon us. I think this is simply overwhelming. But I believe that we need to **pray constantly for the blessings God wants to give us and that we will be surprised and pleased and sometimes amazed at what God does if we ask him.**

Now it's not fair to compare yourself to somebody else. At the healing Mass we have every third Friday, some people come up and are touched and healed and other people are not at that time, at least as far as I can tell. Why is that? I have no idea. **God works in each person's life according to what they need.** I just buried one of my dearest friends, who had suffered for five years with cancer, an unusual cancer with no particular known chemotherapy. Being a woman of great faith, she had hundreds and

maybe a thousand friends praying for her constantly, and I am sure that helped her, but it didn't take away the cancer. Her prayer that was actually granted—I never really knew that she actually asked for the cancer to be taken away; she never articulated that prayer in my hearing, but what she did articulate was a prayer that she would never lose joy, that the pain would never take away her joy till the last day, and it didn't. So her prayer was answered. Would that have been my prayer? I am not sure, but that was her prayer.

So Jesus is inviting us not only to a better life, but an entirely new life. In the dialogue with Nicodemus Jesus mentions, “Flesh begets flesh, spirit begets spirit.” We know what “flesh begets flesh” means. **“Spirit begets spirit” means that the life and the nature and the being and the reality that Jesus is offering is totally different from what we know already and does not come automatically, but comes as a new creation, as a new gift, as a new birth, as a new life from above.**

Now God's original plan has always required human cooperation. In the history of the world for however thousands of years it has existed, that is, the human part of it, cooperation has not been too great. We can see this. We see around us symptoms of disorder all over the place, but often we don't see the cause. Now we believe and the gospels proclaim that Jesus has deposed the reigning powers of the world and restored us to new possibilities, but people are still free to say yes or no. We can either accept truth or not.

Now the desire for peace and justice in the world absolutely required that we accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ. **Conscious beings have to choose. We have to choose who will be our master.** Today many people think that the master they want is themselves. For others they don't even bother making a choice; they don't even think about it. They don't examine their lives. They allow the world around them or their own whim to direct what they choose. There is a paradox here I mentioned already. Those who surrender to God's Lordship, which has been given to Christ in the resurrection, experience true freedom. Those who demand personal freedom to do as they please end up being controlled by whatever that is, certainly forces beyond themselves. And we know that a great example and **a great companion on our journey to wholeness and to holiness is our Blessed Mother.** She was Jesus' first and most loyal disciple. She said at the Annunciation, **“Let it be done to me according to your word.” And that is a wonderful prayer for each of us.**

Now in this following week I have **a few suggested readings** for you, if you choose. I don't want you to burden yourself with them. You could look at Psalm 139. You could read chapter 34 of Ezekiel, verses 11-16, **Ezekiel 34:11-16, Psalm 139.** Or you could look at **St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 28-39.** I don't want to discourage you from reading, but, on the other hand, I don't want to burden you either. **This is to be a process that is light, that is full of light and air and gentle. You need not and should not feel pushed or rushed or forced.** That is not God. God does not push or rush or force. That's either you or some spirit interfering with your spiritual growth.